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Boise's largest privately funded public art piece now shines Downtown

BY DANA OLAND - doland@idahostatesman.com
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Artist Ray King surveyed the expanse of the Boise Plaza entry. Tape measure and drill in hand, he spent the better part of Tuesday boring holes into the granite stone surface of the outdoor plaza.

With tools such as diamond bit drills, thousands of dichroic glass cubes, wrenches and a hydraulic lift, King makes art in the real - and concrete - world.

But King is sculpting with something less solid and tangible: the elusive phenomenon of light.

"People think I work with glass, and I do, but really my medium is light," the Philadelphia-based artist says.

King's piece, "Aqua," adds a boldly contemporary element to the city's landscape and raises the bar for public art in Boise, says the city's public art manager, Karen Bubb.

"That's something we don't often have the opportunity to do in the public sector, where art is developed through a more democratic process," Bubb says. "It's a piece of significant scale. It's highly technical and abstract and unlike anything else that can be seen in this state."

When Rafanelli & Nahas bought the Boise Plaza, formerly the Boise Cascade building, and several surrounding blocks four years ago, they knew they eventually would install a landmark piece of art, says Scott Schoenherr, development director for Rafanelli & Nahas and a partner in the Boise Plaza project.

"The building seemed like it was crying out for a piece of art," Schoenherr says. "Public art helps you create a place. Place-making might be an overused term, but we really wanted something with synergy that makes this a place people want to be."

The Boise Plaza is an important building in an architectural sense. It was built in 1971 and is the only building in Idaho designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the international megafirm that built the Hancock and Willis (formerly Sears) towers in Chicago.



Chris Butler
Philadelphia artist Ray King installs his piece Friday afternoon at the Boise Plaza in Downtown Boise. The work is made of thousands of glass cubes hanging on cables.

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About 25 people attended a talk at the Boise Plaza about "Aqua" with artist Ray King on Thursday. Here's some of what the public had to say:

© Boise artist Marcus Pierce: "I think it's really impressive, high-caliber work. It sets a precedent for what public art can be. ... It's difficult to balance creating something so beautiful with all the technical aspects."

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So they were careful in how they selected this work, Schoenherr says. They hired an art consultant to identify national artists doing large-scale public art. They originally received applications from about 20. King was one of seven who traveled to Boise and were paid for proposals.

"AquA" is an ode to water, a precious commodity in Idaho and the West and a metaphor for health, King says.

It hangs 9 feet over the front entrance on the plaza's stage-like Bannock Street-side entry. Stainless steel cables 32 feet long hold more than 2,000 dichroic glass cubes.

One side of each cube is coated with dichroic film, a space-age product developed by NASA while it experimented with protective visors for astronauts.

Dichroic means "two-color." The glass reflects one color but projects its complement. So, when you look up at "AquA," it will reflect blues; then when the sun or other light source hits it, it will project an amber gold.

(Albeit softer hues, the colors echo Boise State's blue and orange.)

The cubes hang in a shape that is 17 feet wide and 13 feet, 6 inches tall. From a distance, it will appear to hover, like a water droplet ready to fall.

"A lot of my pieces are really water metaphors, like a waterfall without water," King says. "It has the same kind of attraction for the eye. With this coated glass, it's like looking out on the surface of a lake shimmering with light."

King started his career working in stained glass and became an influential artist in the crafts movement in the 1970s. But he grew bored with the medium, he says.

"I realized I didn't have to think about it any more. I could just drive. That was my exit point," he says.

Then he discovered the element that comes through glass was more interesting. He began charting the sun and building windows that reflected differently at different times of year, depending on the sun's position.

King works on an international scale and has created works in Washington, D.C.; Boston; New York City; Taipei, Taiwan; Erbusco, Italy; Denver; and Salt Lake City.

King's budgets usually run from \$100,000 to \$12 million (as for a piece he is currently working on in Taipei). Boise's is a medium-sized project. Because it is privately funded, the total budget was not available.

Dana Oland: 377-6442

© Deniz Erkenn of Boise: "I like the idea it works with light. It's a good combination of technology and nature."

© Thomas Zabala, owner of ZGA Architects in Boise: "It's nice to see an owner of a significant building commit to something like this, not just for their own purposes, but to add another visual display to the city. It shows a commitment to Boise and it extends the variety of art that public people are exposed to here."

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